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He Keeps Deepest Secrets

Information Security Unit Is Obscure but Powerful

By Pete Earley
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Tucked in a corner of the General Services Administration building, behind a heavy metal door monitored by a burglar alarm, Steven Garfinkel keeps track of the government's deepest secrets—all 1,434,668 of them.

But that's only the "Top Secrets." The government doesn't bother counting how many documents have been marked "secret" or "confidential," but it thinks that every "Top Secret" generates about 20 other classified documents as bits and pieces of the original proceed through the bureaucracy.

Watching all those pieces is the job of the Information Security Oversight Office, an obscure unit created in 1978 to oversee how agencies classify documents.

As Garfinkel, its director, says, "This is not your normal federal agency."

For instance, the office's budget is part of the National Archives', but the office reports to the National Security Council.

Garfinkel was appointed by the GSA administrator, but his appointment had to be approved by the president, even though his job is part of the civil service.

The office is responsible for keeping statistics on government secrets, teaching federal agencies how to classify documents and performing spot inspections to ensure that only documents that need to be classified are kept from the public.

For an operation with a budget of only $600,000 and a staff of 11, the office has considerable power. Its inspectors can demand to see any agency's most sensitive documents. "We get into safes that no one else can get into, except, of course, the president," Garfinkel said. The only way an agency can stop an inspection is by appealing to the NSC.

Under the office's first director, former representative Michael T. Blouin (D-Iowa), the ISOO had a reputation for setting up confrontations with the agencies. Inspectors frequently ordered the Defense Department and CIA, which together generate 98 percent of all classified documents, to cough up sensitive reports.

But Garfinkel, who was an attorney at the National Archives for 10 years, emphasizes cooperation. "We don't need to see the most sensitive documents to make sure that an agency is classifying its records correctly," he said.

The office has changed in other ways since Reagan took office, as can be seen by comparing the ISOO's first annual report for fiscal 1979 and its most recent report covering fiscal 1982. The first report was 53 pages long and crammed with specifics about programs the office initiated to promote declassification. No such programs are mentioned in the new report, and the number of documents being reviewed for possible declassification has decreased 78 percent since 1980.

The latest report also devotes four of its 24 pages to a single-spaced, typewritten essay explaining why Reagan issued a controversial executive order last year reversing a 30-year trend toward more openness in government and most of the changes that Jimmy Carter implemented when he created the ISOO.

Garfinkel, who has defended the Reagan order from the start, contends that the fears of journalists, scholars and members of Congress that the executive order would be abused were unfounded.

During the first year that the Reagan order was in effect, the number of government secrets increased less than 1 percent, he said. Before 1980, the number of secrets increased an average of 10 percent per year.

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